THE HOUR OF PERIL.

A TALE OF THE INDIAN BORDER.

BY PERCY H. SELTON.

It was the middle of October. The era was that of the American Revolution. The scene was a little farmhouse or rather cottage, situated in one of the pleasantest nooks of the valley of the Mohawk. A few acres of cleared land surrounded the tenement which was apparently buried in the very heart of the forest In the rear of the cottage was a garden, through which brawled a brook, that after tinkling over a tiny waterfall in one of the neighboring fields, lost itself in the shadows of the dim old woods to the right of the house. Though the cottage, as we have said, was small, no language can describe its beauty. Every thing connected with the structure bore the impress of neatness and taste. It had been originally built of hewn-logs, and these had subsequently been covered with a weather-boarding, but neither could new be seen through the thick canopy of vine-leaves which covered the walls, and which all dyed in hues of purple, crimson and gold, gave the cottage a fairy-like appearance, reminding the traveller of the autumnal hills of the Rhine. Indeed so completely was the tenement buried in the foliage that the windows themselves were half shrouded from sight, while the door-way was partially concealed by the leaves that hung drooping from the arbor overhead.

The hour at which our story opens was that witching time betwixt sunset and dark, when every thing is hushed in a silence that seems to partake of Paradise. On this evening the twilight was peculiarly soothing. The sunset yet faintly reddened the western sky, and the moon just began to be seen on the eastern horizon, while the balmy wind of an autumnal evening was wakening its low symphony over earth and air. The little cascade could be heard murmuring sweetly in the distance. Occasionally a leaf would rustle to the ground, or the forest emit a low mysterious sound like the sighing of a multitude of wood-nymphs; while, now and then, the vine-leaves would rattle pleasantly in the breeze, or the whistle of a wood-pigeon would be heard down in the forest. The hour was one for melancholy yet sweet emotions—it was an hour to make

one forget the earth and aspire after heaven.

In one of the rooms of the little cottage sat two beings, and both were surpassingly beautiful. The one was a dark-haired girl, with large flashing hazel eyes, and a figure that would have become a Juno. Her mien, so queenly and majestic, yet imbued with a feminine grace that rendered it bewitching—her lofty impassioned brow, softened, however, by a playfulness of expression almost infantile—and the deep dark splendor of her lustrous eyes so full of high resolve, yet beaming with womanly tenderness,—all these combined to form a face and figure which reminded you one while of a Penthesalia, and another while of a Hebe. Her companion was smaller in size, and of a different order of beauty. Nothing could be more exquisitely proportioned than her slight and sylph-like figure—and yet nothing could be more full and rounded than every delicate limb. Her face was like that of a Madonna, so high and holy was its expression. It was one indeed to fall down before and worship. The eyes were of a deep blue, the hair was of a sunshiny gold, the forehead was broad and beautifully smooth, the lips were of a luscious red and delicately chiselled, and the smile that played around her mouth when she spoke had a purity and sweetness, and told of such deep affection smouldering in the virgin heart of the owner, that you could not gaze without admiration, nor admire without love. And then, as her companion spoke gaily and often teasingly on some subject which seemed to be near the heart of the maiden, the blushes would momently shoot into her face and die away, as the northern lights on a clear wintry evening flush the sky for an instant and then fade.

"Yes, coz," continued her companion, keeping up a conversation which had lasted some time, "this unnatural war will soon be at an end, and then how happy shall we all be—you in your house in the clearing below, and we in this old homestead scarcely a ten minutes walk distant But," she added, rising, " it is nearly time for brother to be here. He said he would be absent at the fort only for two or three hours at the utmost, and it has now been at least four. But I suppose he will soon return—I must make you promise to chide Harry when he gets here—what! blushing again—but hark! was that a footstep?"

For an instant both maidens paused and listened; but not hearing a repetition

of the fancied sound, they resumed their conversation.

"I did not hear any step," said Helen, " and I think I would have—" she stopped, on seeing the eyes of her cousin fixed laughingly on her, and turned away in a beautiful embarrassment

"You would have said, or rather you thought," said her companion archly, " that you should know Harry's footstep—was it not so, sweet coz? " continued Jane, patting the fair girl's cheek as she would have caressed that of a young sister, " come, I know your every thought, and now you need not blush to own your love for Harry, when a nobler or truer heart never beat in a manly bosom," and as the warm hearted girl pronounced this eulogium on her brother, her dark eye kindled with sisterly pride.

"I do not blush to own that I love Harry," said the younger maiden, " as you know, dear Jane; and I would lay down my life," she continued with enthusiasm, " at any time, if it became necessary, for his—so wholly and unreservedly do I cherish his image in my heart—and that is a confession I have never made before, even to you. But—but—but—"

"Never mind the buts, sweet coz," gaily said Jane, " I guess your excuse, although you cannot find words in which to express it, for if it had been about that madcap Charley Stan worth we had been conversing, and I had been convicted of blushing at his name, the excuse I should have given would have been that I could not help it," and the maiden actually paused from sheer want of breath as she finished the sentence.

"Oh! how you rattle on, Jane," said her milder companion, "I am sure I never could talk as you do, about Harry."

"And why not, Helen? Simply because it is not your nature so to do. But you know you were always silent and reserved, while I have been called a rattler ever since we dressed our dolls together in the old parlor in Albany, before father had failed, or either of us had thought of these wild but beautiful woods."

"Or of Captain Stanworth," interposed Helen, with something of the archness of her companion.

"Why, my modest coz," retorted Jane, merrily lifting up her hands in affected astonishment, a gesture which brought the blood again into the cheeks of her sensitive companion, "you have really cast off your reserve at last—the leopard has changed his spots—but" she added suddenly, seeing that the blood had left Helen's face, and that her cheeks had assumed a hue as livid as that of death, while her eyes, distended with horror, were fixed in a stony gaze at some object across the shoulder of the speaker, " what is the matter? Are you ill? In heaven's name speak."

Helen made an attempt to reply, for her lips moved but it seemed as if some strange power had deprived he r of speech, and her only reply to the question was mad e by pointing with a quivering finger in the direction in which her gaze was fixed. All this passed in an instant —the next moment Jane turned hurriedly around.

The sight that met her eyes would have driven the blood back in torrents on the stoutest heart, and well accounted for the terror which shook the frame of Helen as in an ague-fit, for in the opposite casement might be seen the dark scowling face of an Indian, in his war paint, peering through the brown embowering foliage. He had approached unseen and pushing aside the vine leaves, glared in on the cousins like a tiger on his prey Never had a more fearful countenance met the eye of either of the maidens. His wrinkled brow was bent into a habitual frown, and from beneath his overhanging forehead gleamed forth his dark fiery eyes like livid coals glowing far down in a furnace. His teeth were slightly parted in a sardonic smile, and his nostrils were distended in eager anticipation of his prey. A slight scream burst from Isabel's lips as her eye fell on this fearful apparition, and for a moment, as she reflected on the situation of Helen and herself, her brain whirled wildly around, as if reason was reeling from its throne. And well might her heart beat quick, the color flush and go in her cheek, and her breath come in short quick gasps, when she reflected on her unprotected situation. It was the year in which the Mohawks under

Brandt made those terrible incursions into the valley which have since filled the most melancholy pages of our revolutionary history,—incursions in which villages were depopulated, whole districts laid waste, and some of the most frightful massacres committed by the savages and their more barbarous allies the tories, that ever have stained the records of the past—and although the settlements in the vicinity where our heroines resided had hitherto been considered safe from the enemy, yet rumors of the atrocious deeds perpetrated by the Indians had often drawn tears from the cousins' eyes, and made the name of a Mohawk as terrible to them as that of some all-destroying pestilence, aye ! or of death itself. Jane saw, at a glance, therefore the dangers that surrounded her. She knew enough to know that the Indian before her was an enemy and judging from his paint, engaged on a war-expedition. Besides that, the intruder was not unaccompanied, for a hasty glance revealed to her more than one dusky face in the background. Alone, unprotected, far from all succor—what could two feeble women do against such foes t Jane suspected moreover that either the assailants were in such force as to defy all the strength of the valley, or else that the cottage had been watched with the intention of surprising its more defenceless inmates when their natural protectors should be absent. A dark fear also shot across her mind lest her brother should have been waylaid and murdered. The thought was agony itself; for if such had indeed been the case, where would be the slightest hope of succor even if the savages should spare their life and that of Helen, and carry them off as prisoners? Suddenly the idea flashed across her mind, that perhaps she might make good a defence for a few minutes, trusting that during the delay either help might arrive, or some accident occur to rescue them in another way. With this object, with admirable presence of mind, she sprang to the door of the apartment and hastily letting fall a huge bar which served for a bolt in lieu of a more finished fastening, effectually excluded the assailants from entering in that direction, without first destroying the door. This manoeuvre did not occupy an instant, during which Helen had sunk almost fainting into a chair; but when Jane returned to her cousin, the daring girl found that the wily savage who had first arrested her attention was endeavoring to dash in the window frame, and thus gain an ingress into the apartment.

The spirit of Jane was high and bold even to masculine courage, and it was now rendered even more so by the helplessness of her cousin and the conviction that everything depended on her own energies. It was but the work of an instant therefore for her to seize a musket which depended on rough hooks from the ceiling, as was usual in every frontier house at that period, and presenting it at the head of the savage to await his entrance. It was a noble sight to gaze on the beautiful girl then, and notice how the peril of her situation had changed her demeanor in a few moments from that of gay and reckless merriment into the high resolve of a Spartan woman. Her cheek was flushed with excitement, her dark eyes beamed with a lustre like that of stars flashing through a stormy cloud, and her proud form appeared dilated to the most gigantic proportions. Yet even then —even at the breathless crisis of her fate, her woman's nature for a second prevailed over her stern resolve, she hesitated, her hands faltered, and the muzzle of her piece dropped; but, as the wily savage, eager to avail himself of her momentary vacillation, leaped up on the sill with the intention of bounding into the room with the next spring, the consciousness of her peril and that of Helen returned on her in its full force, her resolution returned, her hand no longer faltered, and raising the musket to a level with the advancing head of the savage, she pulled the trigger for the first time in her life, and fired. The Indian gave a sharp yell, quivered in every limb, and springing half way up fell dead across the sill, effectually blocking up the casement But this providential circumstance was for the moment overlooked in the strange feeling, which, now that she had done the deed, came over the heart of the heroic girl. Perhaps also her sudden paleness was attributable in a measure to the wild yell that, on the fall of their leader, burst from the voices of a dozen savages outside the house.

"Oh! what have you done?" gasped Helen, pale as a corpse, looking fearfully at Jane when that frightful yell had ceased.

" God help me," responded Jane, " I scarcely know. But if I had not acted as I did, he would have been in the room in another instant, and a merciless death would have been our lot ere this. We are now safe for a while —at least until they force the door. Unless succor arrives before they resort to that," continued the maiden, her whole nature appearing suddenly altered by the daring deed

she had done, " we shall die under their tomahawks, for we can hope for no mercy now. Hold this powder-horn," she continued, for she had already seized the ammunition hanging from the ceiling with the musket, and commenced re-loading, "but no! your hand trembles too much—poor girl!—I must do it myself. There it is finished—cheer up, sweet coz: help may even now be at hand—Harry cannot delay much longer."

"Oh! pray heaven that he may not come now," gasped Helen, "it would be certain death. Do you think he will come at this late hour Jane? Oh! say he will not. Or perhaps he is already in their hands," and the usually mild eyes of the speaker gleamed with a strange lustre as she looked imploringly into the face of Jane.

"No, no! it is impossible," quickly responded her companion—caring only to soothe her cousin—" no, he is detained by something that has kept him at the fort, and he is too skilful a forester to approach even his own home, without becoming aware of the vicinity of enemies."

" Oh! thank you, thank you for those words," murmured Helen, " if I am to die let it be, but let not Harry fall, oh! heavenly father, and that too, in a vain attempt to rescue me," and the angelic being as she spoke raised her eyes to heaven. They were wet with tears.

Jane turned away; but though her heart was full, no tear stood in her large dark eye. In her mind a sense of their peril, and a consciousness that their only hope of life depended on her own unassisted energies, had consumed every other feeling—and though different emotions might meanwhile agitate her bosom, they could do so only in a secondary degree, to that one over-ruling sensation which now reigned paramount in her bosom. Her whole energies were devoted to the preservation, if possible, of their lives. While therefore gently pressing the trembling maiden to her bosom, Jane remained alive to the slightest sound which might betray a renewed at. tack on the part of their foes. For a few moments, however, it seemed as if the savages had withdrawn, during which, Jane strove to reassure the sensitive being in her arms, using a thousand reasons, but which were, alas! insufficient to her own mind, why help must

soon arrive, and why no possible injury could fall on her brother.

It was a touching scene to behold those two young beings during that pause in the attack—the one slight and timorous as the startled fawn, the other comparatively bold as the antlered stag—the one burying her face in her companion's bosom, and seeming in every thing to be the defenceless being whom we love to picture as seeking our protection, the other bolder and more composed, soothingly caressing the trembler on her bosom, whispering words of comfort and hope into the ear of her friend, and appearing in every thing to fulfil the duties of our sterner and more courageous sex. Or to alter the figure, the one seemed like a weeping seraph seeking protection on the breast of some higher yet not less beautiful intelligence, while the other was that loftier spirit—some Gabriel perhaps from beneath the great white throne—breathing words of consolation into the afflicted soul of the mourner.

But it was not long that the two maidens were allowed thus to indulge their feelings unrestrained,—for soon the silence was broken by another whoop on the part of the savages, and it soon became evident that the Indians, infuriated by the death of their companion, had determined to carry the house at all hazards. Their first point of attack was the door, against which the blows of their hatchets soon fell in terrible rapidity. Jane's heart died within her, for she knew that not the slightest hope remained for her and Helen, if their assailants should succeed. With a throbbing heart therefore she gazed on the door, grasping the musket firmly, however, as she looked, and turning momently to the alarmed being at her side to whisper words of hope and consolation. But events were now coming to a crisis. They crowded on each other in fearful rapidity. Louder and louder swelled the wild shouts of the savages outside, and fiercer and more fierce were the blows that they hailed on the door, which already began to quiver beneath the repeated strokes. And now with one long wild shout a panel fell in—another and another blow succeeded; and at each stroke the door shivered as if about to fall. At this crisis a dusky form flitted past the shattered panel on the outside, and Jane availing herself of the oversight, raised her piece,—but reflecting that it would be of greater service to her in the very moment of the onset she lowered the muzzle. As she did so she heard a noise behind her, followed by a shriek from her cousin—for Helen had

now sank almost fainting with terror into a chair— and turning quickly around she saw a tall brawny savage who had just leaped through the casement, and the sound of whose feet alighting on the floor had attracted her attention. The wily barbarian had availed himself of the undivided attention which Jane bestowed on the yielding door to remove the corpse of his leader from the window and thus obtain an entrance. For the first moment during that eventful hour, Jane was too paralyzed to act. The Indian seized the favorable instant and springing like a panther on the amazed girl, wrenched the musket from her hand with the speed of thought, accompanying the action with a yell of savage delight— and then unsheathing his tomahawk, he raised it aloft and whirled it in rapid, uncertain circles around his head, as if momently about to strike his prey, yet delaying the blow, from instant to instant, to enjoy the agonies of his victims—and in his triumphant smile, his exulting smile, and the expression of savage pleasure imprinted on his features might be read the gratification which he felt in subjecting his victims to this fiendish torment. Meantime Jane had sank down on her knees beside Helen, and the two cousins were clasped in each others arms, awaiting the death which was now inevitable—yet even in that moment it was touching to behold the heroism with which Jane covered, as much as possible, the form of Helen with her own, .seeming like a Niobe endeavoring to shroud her cousin from the destroyer's stroke. All this had passed with the rapidity of thought. The intruder's appearance, the loss of the musket, the malicious torture of the Indian, and the List convulsive embraces of the maidens, had scarcely occupied a longer period than that of a few seconds.

Who can tell the thoughts that meanwhile rushed, like an army of freed and wild spectres, through the souls of the two maidens? Oh! is not a whole life crowded into the hour of death? Yet the cousins thought not, in that awful moment, wholly of themselves,—for there were wild outpourings of their hearts to those dear ones whom they should never see again. And little did the manly bosoms of their lovers reck of the peril which surrounded Jane and Helen. So young, so fair, so full of hope, so fit to make this world a heaven— and yet to die this fearful death, unsoothed, unknelled, far from their family, forever hidden from the eyes of friendship and love! But the moments of their existence were now numbered—the last grain of sand was about falling from the glass. Drawing Helen convulsively to her bosom, and lifting her dark

lustrous eye upward in a wild appeal to heaven. Jane tore her thoughts from earth and breathed a final prayer to heaven. For the last time the weapon of the savage swung on high. The flash of the polished blade gleamed wildly in the shadowy twilight across the sight of Jane—and she could hear the whistling of the keen weapon as it cut the air in its descent—but, at that instant, clear, sharp and ringing, the bullet of a rifle sang across the twilight, and giving a sudden leap upwards the savage fell dead at the feet of Jane, his tomahawk making a circuit and striking harmlessly in the floor as he staggered to the ground,—while, wild and loud, rising even over the crack of the piece, swelled out the shout of a well known voice, and almost instantaneously a tall form sprang in through the casement, revealing to the astonished eyes of the maidens, the brother of Jane and v the lover of Helen Devereux. On the moment too a giant's blow sent the door reeling from its hinges, and an officer in the continental uniform dashed into the room, followed by a score of soldiers.

" Jane—thank God she is safe!" exclaimed the officer as he sprang forward and caught in his arms the heroic girl, who now that the danger was past swooned away.

"And Helen—poor, poor girl!—the savage bloodhounds have almost been your death!" said her athletic lover as he bore her inanimate form toward the casement, and dashed over her face the water in a flower vase that stood on a table nigh.

It was some hours later in the evening, and in place of the tumult which had marked the twilight, a holy silence reigned around the cottage and on the surrounding forest The moon rode high in heaven, shining from a cloudless sky with a calm and mystic light, like that shed from the countenance of a Sybil. The shadows of the old woods without lay weird and solemn on the landscape, while the little waterfall sent up a low murmuring sound as if in unison with the scene.

By the same window at which they sat when we first introduced them to the reader, again sat the cousins; but now their lovers were at their aide, and their

talk was less gay than before. Every vestige of the late struggle had been removed from the apartment, and no one would have thought that in the now quiet room had, only a few hours before, raged the sound of mortal strife.

"And you will have us again to explain how we arrived so opportunely to your rescue," said the brother of Jane in his frank voice, "well—they say the curiosity of your sex is never satisfied—but I should not be so gay, you would say by that glance of your eye, Helen—was it not so? Well, though I cannot help being glad, very glad, yet I will sober down my expressions for once.

"You know that I left you to go to the fort, intending to return a couple of hours before nightfall,—but when I got half way to the place I struck an Indian trail, and following it up with astonishment, I saw that it led back of the fort and down the valley. I was beyond measure surprised, for the savages had never penetrated to our vicinity. I reflected a moment, hesitating whether to return home and get you to a place of safety or to hurry on to the fort and give the alarm. As the trail did not appear to run in this direction, I fancied there would be no danger in leaving you an hour or two longer, especially when I knew that hastening instantly to the fort I might be the means of saving many lives.

Accordingly I hurried forward and reached my journey's end a few minutes before the arrival of Captain Stanworth, who had been despatched to protect the valley, information having reached head-quarters, through intercepted letters, of an intention, on the part of the savages, to make a descent in this vicinity. Almost at the same instant a scout came in who had struck the Indian trail below the fort, and who communicated the alarming intelligence that the trail had turned oft towards our section of the valley. We felt that not a moment was to be lost, but with most of the captain's company and such of the neighbors who chose to volunteer, hurried hither. Some delay, however, had by this time occurred, and though we proceeded forwards at a most rapid pace, we arrived barely in time to rescue you. Nor could we have saved you had the savages maintained as keen a watch for foes as usual; but managing to surprise the assailants they fell an easy prey. The noise made by them in hewing at the door prevented you and them from hearing our approach. Providentially catching sight of a savage springing in at the casement, I dashed to the open

window, and-you know the rest. We have no doubt extirpated the whole of the band, but tomorrow we will, to ensure your safety, conduct you to the fort, and scour the country for the barbarians."

Our story is done. We will, however, add that the Valley was never again disturbed by an irruption of Indians, and that the following summer beheld the realization of the picture described by Jane—-for Stanworth retiring from the service was united to the heroic girl, while, on the same day, Helen gave her hand to the choice of her heart. The two families took up their residence within a few minutes walk of each other, and to this day their descendants inhabit the old homesteads.